

Sentinel Rock— A New Direct North Wall Route

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(This article is included not only because the ascent is significant in itself but also because it relates in detail one of the Yosemite Class VI climbs described in the author's other article and explains how the techniques are actually used.—Editor.)

SENTINEL ROCK has probably meant more to Yosemite climbers than any other rock formation in the Valley. It is the peak that climbers in Camp 4 see first in the early morning, when it is dark gray and frightful, and last in the late afternoon, when it turns all shades of gold. More than any other formation it shows the fantastic changes of light and shadows which so characterize this "valley of light". One can stand on the valley floor and watch the rays of the sun expose hidden dihedrals, cracks, ledges and chimneys and make them disappear again into the gray. It is in the late afternoon, when it is glowing with warm yellow light, that it is the most awesome, beautiful and alluring. It is a common sight at this time to see a climber quietly looking up, perhaps thinking he would like to be up there, or maybe looking back on some climb he once did there. John Salathé must have been captivated by its beauty when he picked it to be the second of his two great climbs in Yosemite.

When I returned to the Valley in June with thoughts of a new direct route on the north wall, I learned that a "direct" had been finished just the day before. Tom Frost and Royal Robbins had completed a magnificent three-day ascent, using over 200 pitons and no expansion bolts. Though greatly disappointed, I felt that there were possibilities for two other new direct lines on the north wall. T. M. Herbert and I decided to try a new line between the old north face route and the new direct one.

The next day we carried loads of equipment, water and food to the base, expecting to start climbing the following day. But for the whole week it rained and snowed. We could not even climb an easy route, as all our gear was up at the base. When the weather finally cleared, we climbed in the early morning light up the Tree Ledge Traverse to the base of the actual wall. The traverse is a system of ascending, sand-covered ledges with uncomfortable, unroped moves here and there. One always feels relieved to get to the start of the real climbing.

The first section of the wall ascends a chimney behind a 400-foot-high slab. After two easy pitches, the third turned out to be a long, awkward, poorly protected chimney. Above it we traversed left and then went up the face of the slab, placing a direct-aid piton from a very difficult position. From the ledge on the top of the slab, the wall soared upward with unbelievable steepness. Herbert nailed up for 20 feet, traversed a few feet to the right and started placing a varied assortment of pitons in what proved to be one of the most difficult leads on the wall. The artificial climbing was slow and awkward; a piton here, one over there, no real system to follow. Time and again, Herbert would be completely stopped, only to find as the last resort a small crack hidden in a niche or behind a clump of dirt or a bush. On the next lead I nailed up some easy slabs, then up an overhanging corner from the middle of which I dropped back down and swung over to the right to a steep step, which I nailed to the next belay point. The succeeding lead, a long traverse to the left, looked very difficult. We exchanged hardware and hauling lines, and Herbert started off. First a few delicate moves to the left, then a piton placed upside down, then twelve more, all upside down, took him 130 feet to a foothold at the base of an inside corner. As at each of the last three belay points, an expansion bolt was necessary for an anchor. In gathering darkness, we rappelled down to the ledge on the top of the slab to bivouac.

The next morning after prusiking up the ropes, I started placing large angle pitons in the overhanging inside corner. After a while I switched over to some small cracks on the right wall of the corner. Everything seemed awkward and I had trouble standing up high in my stirrups. Looking down, I saw that the hauling line was hanging out from Herbert. About 80 feet up, I traversed to the right to a fine flat ledge. Herbert ran out of rope on the next lead, an easy class 3 and 4 pitch. I then nailed a thin vertical flake until I reached a roof where a piton let me drop down and pendulum to the left. I climbed up on large holds to a wide, easy crack, which I nailed for 20 feet. From its top, I traversed left and dropped into the prominent large dihedral. Belaying from a chimney, I watched Herbert tackle the next pitch. After placing two 3-inch angles in the corner, he laybacked over an overhanging bulge, where he inserted a long horizontal piton on the left wall of the dihedral. From here it was solid nailing up a good crack in the inside corner. He passed a small overhang but took a ten-foot fall from the second one. Immediately back up, he put in a bolt instead of a piton. Placing a couple more pitons for anchors and belaying in stirrups, he hauled up the packs, tied them off, and put me on belay. Belaying in slings is so common now on the big Yosemite climbs that you rarely think twice about it—except when you clean out a pitch and

have only three or four pitons left between you and the belayer. Each succeeding piton removed makes you feel less secure. When finally both of us and two heavy packs were all hanging from two of three anchor pitons, I did not hesitate but hurriedly started up the next pitch.

I placed a few insecure pitons in a dirt-filled crack of the corner and moved over two awkward overhangs to find myself under the large overhang which capped the dihedral. I could tell at once that we were in trouble. The overhang was formed by layers of flakes three to five inches thick, which resounded with hollow Afro-Cuban sounds under hammer blows. To nail these would be madness, for if one broke and fell, it would shoot down and guillotine the belayer. Suspended from a bolt, I peered over the overhang to see that the nearest good crack was 25 feet diagonally up and to the right. With only four bolts left, I was doubtful that we could reach it. I could not even try because I knew that we would need all four of the bolts to retreat. What folly! All that work for nothing! I stood in my stirrups for half an hour, swearing and cursing at my stupidity for not bringing more bolts along. It really hurt to have to retreat from so high, but because it was crazy to stay there, we started down.

The retreat called for a rappel, then a tension traverse from the end of which we placed a bolt or piton to rappel again; otherwise we should have ended in mid-air under an overhang. This we did all the way down the wall. That day, however, we only made two rappels and got back to the flat ledge, where we spent the night. We reached the valley floor by noon the next day.

Back we came in September. We hurried up the first eight pitches to bivouac high for an early start in the morning, but barely made the ledge before dark. The next day we reached our high point at noon. All the way I had been amazed at how difficult the climbing was. Though I was in better shape than in the spring, it seemed harder than I had remembered it.

From the high point I placed a knife blade, a bolt, a 2-inch angle and another bolt—all the while diagonalizing up to the right and going over a couple of flakes. It was awkward and tiring to place the bolts over to the side on the steep wall where I was never in balance. Four bolts and three pitons higher, I reached the vertical crack, which I nailed for 25 feet before I stopped to belay. Before bringing Herbert up, I climbed a few feet of his pitch and placed his first four pitons. When belaying in stirrups, it helps to start the next lead before bringing up your second so that he can quickly pass you with a minimum of confusion. While belaying, I amused myself by dropping pieces of moss and dirt and watching them sail out into the void. What beautiful exposure! Just like a Dolomite wall.

The next pitch followed a dirt-filled bottoming crack. Before a piton could be placed, the dirt had to be cleaned out with the point of the hammer. Updrafts caught the lighter pieces of dust and wafted them into Herbert's eyes. Every time he moved, a small cloud moved with him. Nearly all the pitons entered the crack only a short way and had to be tied off with a hero loop.¹ He did a fine job leading the pitch as I could tell when taking out the pitons; they offered no resistance at all.

It was getting dark as I quickly ascended the next pitch, a chimney narrowing to a 1½-inch direct-aid crack. Above I reached a small ledge which I followed left until my rope ran out. Herbert then led over a difficult bulge, fought his way through a class-7 bush and climbed a deep chimney to a ledge big enough to bivouac on. After the long, hard day, we stopped there in the dark. Close to the top and with the difficulties over, I slept well.

The next morning we climbed a fine free pitch up vertical holds and jam cracks. Another short scramble and we were on the summit, absorbing the warm rays of the benevolent sun, purified and happy; happy that for a few hours we had been free and happy to take some of this freedom back with us.

List of Materials Taken

Clothing. Kletterschuhe, white dress shirt, corduroy knickers, long, thin knicker socks, down jackets, cagoul and pied d'éléphant (coated nylon), wool cap and wool gloves, light sweater (optional).

Hardware. 2 rursps, 4 knife blades, 2 very short and very thin horizontals, 2 short thin horizontals, 2 long thin horizontals, 2 short medium horizontals, 2 long medium horizontals, 2 short thick horizontals, 2 long thick horizontals, 2 long dongs (extra long horizontal), 1 wedge, 6 regular angles (¾"), 4 1" angles (steel), 3 1½" angles (steel), 2 2" angles (aluminum), 2 2½" angles (aluminum), 2 3" angles (aluminum), 1 3½" angle (aluminum), 35 aluminum carabiners.

Climbing Equipment. 2 bivouac packs covered with burlap to protect them when hauling, 2 heavy piton hammers and holsters, 6 3-step nylon stirrups, 3 loops of heavy nylon webbing (no knots but sewed) for carrying pitons, 4 loops of 1" nylon webbing for runners, 10 or more hero loops of 9/16" nylon (8" long), Swami belt about 20 feet long of 1" nylon webbing which is wrapped around the waist and to which ropes are tied.

Food for Three Days. 9 quarts of water, 2 lbs. German salami, 2 lbs. Swiss cheese, 6 boiled eggs, 1 box crackers, 1 bag of gorp (a mixture of 1 can of mixed nuts, 1 box of dried apricots, 1 pkg. of candies, ½ lb. of M. & M. chocolate drops), 2 cans of tuna.

Summary of Statistics

AREA: Yosemite Valley, California.

ASCENT: New direct route on north wall of Sentinel Rock, September, 1962.

PERSONNEL: Yvon Chouinard, T. M. Herbert.

1. Hero loops are loops of 9/16-inch nylon webbing that are used to tie off pitons to prevent leverage, to use in place of an extra carabiner to make a rope run free, to thread through the eye of an awkwardly placed piton, to help you stand a little higher in your stirrups, and if all else fails to use as rappel slings. Yosemite climbers use them religiously and never go on any climb without at least ten of them stuffed in their pockets.